

# Introduction

## Context

The County's last General Plan was written in the context of the late 1980s, when Howard County's growth rate was the most rapid in the State. The County lacked the growth management tools used in many neighboring jurisdictions and could not build new schools and road improvements fast enough to serve the increase in population. The agricultural land base was shrinking rapidly, threatening the survival of the farm industry and the western County's rural landscapes.

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systems.*

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Rather than merely updating previous plans, the 1990 General Plan called for a new approach to growth management and stressed that key actions had to take effect quickly if the County were to maintain some control over its future. The 1990 General Plan was very ambitious, presenting more than 300 specific recommended actions. Many of these have been implemented, including the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance and Development Monitoring System, cluster zoning in the Rural West and Mixed Use Development Districts in the East, an excise tax to fund road improvements, rezoning to provide a better balance of em-

ployment uses and various types of housing, and many other initiatives. Some actions recommended in the 1990 Plan have been only partially implemented or have not yet been addressed by the County.

General Plan 2000 provides continuity with the 1990 Plan and, in fact, retains many *Policies and Actions* that remain relevant. However, it also presents a shift in focus for County planning. The County no longer has the supply of raw land that supported the rapid growth rates of the past three decades. While the 1990 General Plan had growth management as its primary emphasis, General Plan 2000 focuses on the County's transition from a rapidly growing jurisdiction to a "maturing" County. Policies for housing and

employment growth, agricultural preservation and environmental protection are refined. However, the County's land use patterns are largely set. The next twenty years will see the build-out of this pattern and a shift toward renovation and redevelopment of older properties.

## State Planning Mandates

The State of Maryland has become increasingly active in establishing State-wide policies for land use planning and resource protection. Two key packages of legislation enacted during the 1990s influence local planning.

The Maryland legislature passed the Economic Growth, Resource Protection, and Planning Act of 1992 (the 1992 Planning Act) as an outgrowth of two documents prepared in response to concerns over the declining health of the Chesapeake Bay. The first document was the 1987 Chesapeake Bay Agreement, signed by Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the US Environmental Protection Agency. The second document, the 1988 report on Population Growth and Development in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed to the Year 2020 (the 2020 Report), contained recommendations for local governments to adopt new policies toward growth, development and environmental protection.

The 1992 Planning Act includes seven visions to guide growth management throughout the State. During the 2000 legislative session, the General Assembly approved an eighth vision. Local jurisdictions must incorporate these visions into their comprehensive plans. The 1992 Planning Act also mandates that local plans include a sensitive areas element and encourage regulatory flexibility and innovation. The eight visions of the amended 1992 Planning Act are:

1. Development is concentrated in suitable areas;
2. Sensitive areas are protected;
3. In rural areas, growth is directed to existing population centers and resource areas are protected;
4. Stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay and the land is a universal ethic;

5. Conservation of resources, including a reduction in resource consumption, is practiced;
6. To assure the achievement of paragraphs 1-5, economic growth is encouraged and regulatory mechanisms are streamlined;
7. Adequate public facilities and infrastructure under the control of the county or municipal corporation area are available or planned in areas where growth is to occur; and
8. Funding mechanisms are addressed to achieve these visions.

In 1997, the Maryland General Assembly adopted several related programs which together form the Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation initiatives ([Box 1-1](#)). Collectively, these initiatives aim to direct State resources to revitalize older developed areas, preserve some of Maryland's valuable resource and open space lands, and discourage the continuation of development sprawling into rural areas. The centerpiece of the Smart Growth initiatives is the "Priority Funding Areas" legislation, which limits most State infrastructure funding and economic development, housing and other program monies to areas that local governments designate for growth. To spur preservation of undeveloped land, the Rural Legacy Program provides financial resources for the protection of farm and natural resource lands.

These State mandates have not required major changes in Howard County's land use policies and plans. The 1990 General Plan incorporated key goals of the 2020 Report, so the County was the first in Maryland to have a General Plan in compliance with the 1992 Planning Act. However, the visions of the 1992 Planning Act and the Smart Growth programs have strongly reinforced the County's policies of directing most growth and related services to the Planned Service Area in the East and preserving farmland and rural character in western Howard County.

## Howard County's Six Visions

The central theme for this General Plan, cited at the beginning of this Introduction, is that we are stewards of the County's social, economic and environmental systems. All those who have a stake in the County, includ-

## Box 1-1

**Maryland's Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Program****Smart Growth Goals**

The Maryland Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation initiatives have three goals:

- To save our most valuable remaining natural resources before they are forever lost,
- To support existing communities and neighborhoods by targeting State resources to support development in areas where the infrastructure is already in place or planned to support it, and
- To save taxpayers millions of dollars by not building the infrastructure required to support sprawl.

The 1997 General Assembly adopted several specific programs, which together form the Smart Growth initiatives:

**Priority Funding Areas**

The Priority Funding Areas legislation establishes a policy for the use of State funds which supports communities and influences the location of development. Projects in Maryland municipalities, other existing communities, industrial areas and planned growth areas designated by counties will receive priority for State funding over other projects. Priority Funding Areas are locations where the State and local governments target their efforts to encourage and support economic development, community revitalization and new growth.

**Rural Legacy**

The Rural Legacy Program redirects existing State funds into a land preservation program specifically designed to limit the adverse im-

pacts of sprawl on agricultural lands and natural resources. The program reallocates State funds to purchase conservation easements for large contiguous tracts of agricultural, forest and natural areas subject to development pressure, and for fee simple purchase of open space where public access and use is needed. Local governments and private land trusts have been encouraged to identify Rural Legacy Areas and to competitively apply for funds to complement existing land conservation efforts or create new ones.

**Brownfields**

Maryland's new Brownfields law limits liability for those redeveloping unused or abandoned properties that are contaminated, or perceived to be contaminated, unless they exacerbate contamination or create new pollution. The law creates a voluntary clean-up program and provides an opportunity for public participation.

**Live Near Your Work**

This program encourages employees of Maryland's businesses and institutions to buy homes near their workplace. This initiative will help stabilize the neighborhoods surrounding the State's major employers by stimulating home ownership in targeted communities.

**Job Creation Tax Credit**

Since small businesses generate the majority of new job growth in the State, this program encourages mid-sized and smaller businesses to invest in Smart Growth areas. It will encourage small business development and job growth in areas accessible to available labor pools, and will encourage more efficient use of the State's existing infrastructure.

Source: Maryland Department of Planning, [www.op.state.md.us](http://www.op.state.md.us), March 2000

ing individual citizens, businesses, community organizations and government agencies have an important role. As stewards, we seek to build sustainable communities that will meet the needs of current and future generations for environmental health, economic prosperity and social well-being. This central theme derives from sustainable development con-

cepts (Box 1-2). To accomplish this, planning policies must conserve and enhance the value of the natural and built environments. Decision-makers need to promote the County's fiscal health and recognize the needs of all County residents. All of us must undertake actions that will improve our environmental, social and economic systems.

### Box 1-2

#### Sustainable Development

In recent years, sustainability has emerged as a planning concept. Sustainable development was first popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations General Assembly to study connections between the environment and development. The Committee's 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

As amplified by the US President's Council on Sustainable Development, sustainable development addresses the need for more collaborative, flexible and creative approaches to environmental protection and economic development, the need to integrate these goals rather than viewing them as mutually antagonistic, and the need to include social equity concerns. Sustainable development focuses on a long-term perspective, with equal and integrated emphasis on the three legs of the "sustainability stool": economic prosperity, environmental quality and community well-being. The National Association of County Officials and the US Conference of Mayors are encouraging local jurisdictions to build these concepts into comprehensive plans, community plans, neighborhood revitalization efforts and economic development programs nationwide.

Some hallmarks of the sustainable approach to planning are:

- Identifying the environmental, historic, cultural, social, economic

and other resources that make a community viable and unique.

- Seeking solutions that protect and make use of these resources while providing needed growth.
- Encouraging participation from all stakeholders in the community: residents, businesses, institutions, public officials and others.
- Seeking regional communication and cooperation.
- Arriving at solutions through consensus building and collaborative decision-making.
- Developing implementation strategies that define priorities, phasing, stakeholder responsibilities and funding.
- Using community indicators that measure trends related to quality-of-life issues to gauge progress in implementation.

Sustainable development concepts are applicable to all levels of planning. They will be especially valuable as the County faces continuing growth pressure with increasingly constrained land resources, and as the County prepares to look more intensively at maintaining and improving the quality, value and livability of its maturing neighborhoods.

Six visions for Howard County's future support this central theme and provide a foundation for the *Policies and Actions* of this General Plan. These visions, which are developed in the six major chapters of this Plan, are:

- Vision 1:** Our actions will complement State and regional initiatives in resource and growth management.
- Vision 2:** Our rural lands will be productive and rural character will be conserved.
- Vision 3:** Our development will be concentrated within a growth boundary, will be served by adequate public facilities and will encourage economic vitality.

**Vision 4:** Our communities will be livable, safe and distinctive.

**Vision 5:** Our environmental resources will be protected, used wisely and restored to health.

**Vision 6:** Our citizens will take part in the decisions and actions that affect them.

While the six visions of this General Plan are derived from the State-wide visions of the 1992 Planning Act, they also reflect Howard County's particular resources and challenges. The relationships of policies adopted in this Plan to State planning requirements and growth management policies are noted in each chapter's introduction.

## Organization of the Plan

General Plan 2000 is organized around five points or themes. These points – *Responsible Regionalism, Preservation of the Rural West, Balanced and Phased Growth, Working with Nature*, and *Community Conservation and Enhancement* – encompass the major issues the County will face during the next 20 years. A final chapter, *Implementation*, provides priorities for action and recommends a program for monitoring progress and effectiveness.

The traditional elements of a General Plan (for example, land use, transportation, public facilities, housing and environment) may appear several times in this Plan as topics of discussion within two or more of the major themes. This format makes it easier to recognize the interrelationship of these traditional elements. If an element such as transportation is discussed separately, it can become divorced from its relationship with other ele-

ments. The intent of this Plan's format is to better integrate related issues.

Much of the organizational structure of the 1990 General Plan is retained in General Plan 2000. This provides continuity and also helps to highlight the differences. The themes of Balanced Growth and Phased Growth from the 1990 General Plan are combined in this Plan, since many of the 1990 Phased Growth recommendations – for example, the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, the Development Monitoring System and the excise tax for road improvements – have been implemented. Many of the schools, roads and transit improvements noted as needed in the 1990 Plan have been implemented or are in the planning stages.

Additional background material and data related to the topics discussed in this General Plan can be found in a series of Issue Papers published by the Department of Planning and Zoning in 1999 and in the General Plan Guidelines adopted by the County Council on October 4, 1999.